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THE SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCE

Jean Milligan

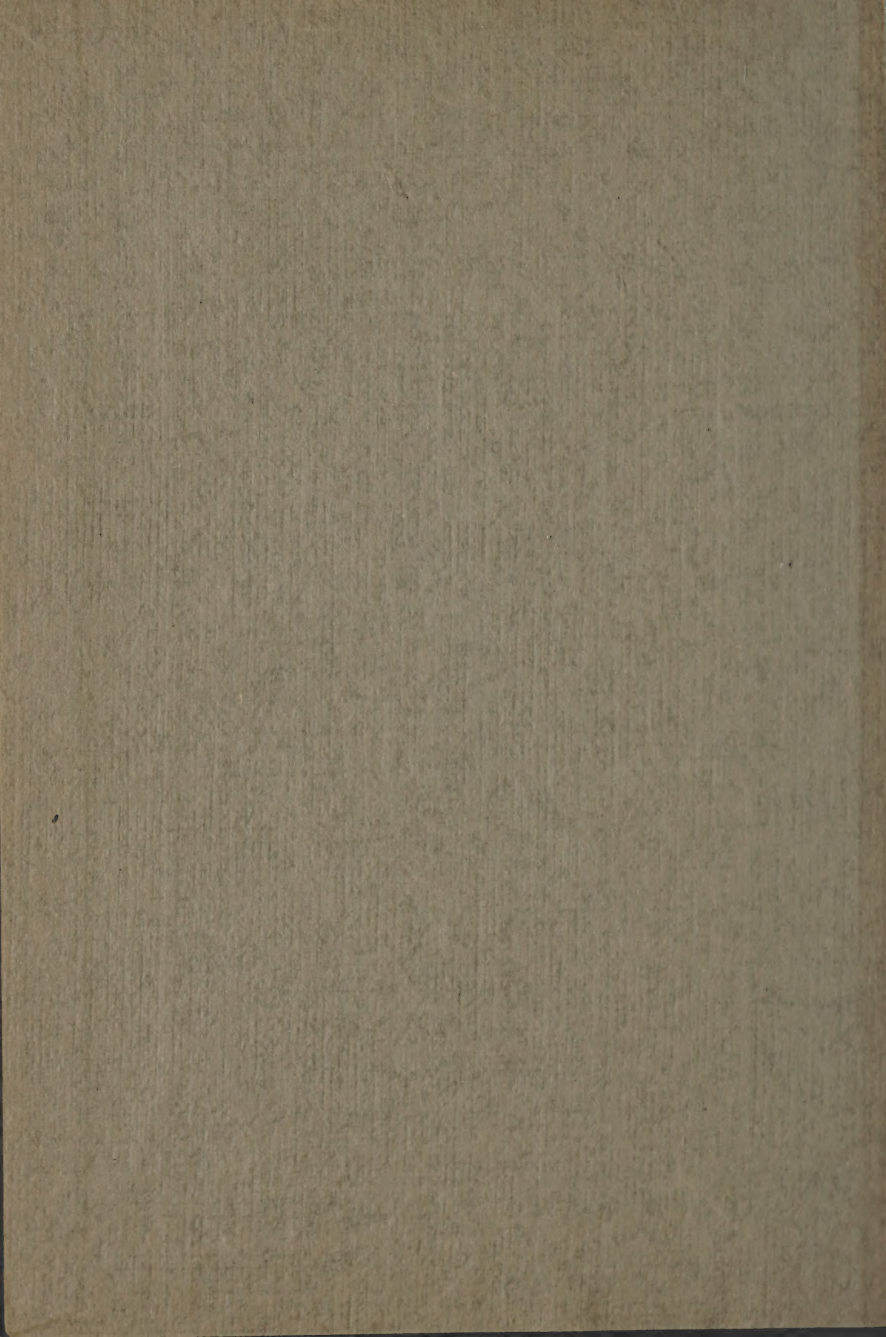


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Country Dance

by

Jean C. Milligan

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The above Society was formed in November, 1923, with the following objects—

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The Scottish Country Dance

By
JEAN C. MILLIGAN

While the knowledge and love of National Songs are widely spread in Scotland, how little comparatively is known of that other great Scottish heritage the Country Dance. The Scottish people are naturally dancers, a fact realised by any one who has experience in teaching dancing, and also proved by the fact that the Scottish Folk Dance is alive and a part to this day of the social life of nearly every country town and village.

One of the most important points of difference between the Scottish Country Dance and the National Dances of most other countries is that the Country Dances of Scotland were until quite recently the dances of every class of the community. In this connection it must be understood that "country" is really a corruption of the word "contra," the dances being of the type where the dancers stand in long lines, partner opposite partner.

The number and variety of the dances are surprising. Every district has its own special dances, while there are a great number common to all. In every part of the country "Petronella," "The Triumph," "The Circassian Circle," and many others are well known and constantly danced. Other dances common to all parts have different names in

different districts: thus we have "The Duke of Perth" in some parts of Perthshire, "Broun's Reel" in other parts of the same county, and in Ayrshire "Clean Pease Strae," all three names denoting the same dance.

The names, too, often give an indication of the district from which a dance originally comes: for example, "The Flowers of Edinburgh," "Delvine Side," "The Glasgow Highlanders," &c. That our Scottish dancing was at one time much under the influence of France is shown also in the names of some dances, as, for example, "Le Tempête," and of such steps as the "Pousette," which is taken almost directly from the French "pousser," to push.

As with any other possession which is gradually being forgotten and sinking into decay, these dances are losing their fineness and beauty, and are becoming influenced by other less admirable types of dancing. It is the especial object, therefore, of all who are endeavouring to revive these Scottish National Dances to bring them back in their most beautiful and refined form, and to preserve in them those national traits which were their outstanding characteristics when they were danced originally. To dance these dances correctly requires excellent technique and rhythm, spirit, dignity, and elegance, combined with a joyful abandon which is yet controlled by the natural reserve of the Scottish people. There is nothing indolent or spiritless about these dances. They are, on the contrary, a real test of skill, vigour, and endurance.

There are, roughly, three types of Scottish Country Dance, but all three types have one great central aim: to arrive at the bottom of the set. The leading couple, when

once started, dance continuously downwards until they become the last couple, and from there they work upwards to their original place by the movement downwards of the couples who follow them. It is chiefly by the method employed to progress downwards that the dances may be classified.

In the first class the top couple do the dance once through only, and then have become the bottom couple. Examples of this type are "The Cumberland Reel," "Strip the Willow," or "Drops of Brandy," and the older form of "The Triumph," in which instead of poussetting down one place, the first couple poussette by themselves down the middle of the dance to bottom place. May I say here that this form, while not included in the Scottish Country Dance Book, is quite allowable, and is a very delightful form of the dance.

In the second class the top couple move down one place at a time by poussetting with the couple immediately below them. This class contains the greatest number of dances, two of the best-known examples of which are "Petronella" and "The Flowers of Edinburgh."

In the third class the movement downward is done by "setting to and turning corners," followed by the "reel of three," at the completion of which the first couple find themselves on the wrong side of the set, the first woman between the second and third men, the first man between the second and third women. They then trip across the set and find themselves once place further down the dance. This third class have a distinctly Highland flavour, and are commonly danced in the North and West. Well-

known examples of this type are "Broun's Reel," "The Fight about the Fireside," and "Speed the Plough."

Once more let me say that in reviving these dances we must make it our object to revive them in their best form, and to do this it is absolutely essential to set a definite standard of form and technique. In this booklet I will endeavour to explain, as fully and as clearly as possible, the standard which the Scottish Country Dance Society is desirous of making universal throughout Scotland.

To do this I shall treat the subject under four heads—(1) the form of the dance, (2) the spirit of the dance, (3) the technique, and (4) the musical stimulus.

I. THE FORM OF THE DANCE.—Before teaching any Country Dance the exact form of that dance should be carefully studied. There are certain formations common to many of these dances—the *movement down the centre* and the *poussette* to some; the *set and turn corners*, and *reel of three* at the sides to others; and yet to others the *rights and lefts*. Now, there is a definite method of carrying out each of these formations, which I shall give here in order to make these dances as clear as possible to the teacher.

In going down the centre, the right hand is given both going down and coming up, and the man should noticeably lead his partner.

The poussette is the step used to change places, *i.e.*, by which the first couple move down one place and the couple immediately below them move up one place. The partners join both hands, and with eight *pas de basque* steps move

up or down as the case may be. The second man crosses over to his partner as the first couple pass him coming up the middle. The movement then is a backward pushing of the second woman before that couple move upward, while the first man going backward draws his partner forward before taking her down one place. The *poussette* should, if possible, be done with a springing turn, although the straight movement forward and backward is allowable with small children. Care should be taken that each couple moving up keep in line with the other couples moving up, and that those moving down do the same.

Set and turn corners. When the first couple come up the centre, the first man places his partner facing the second man, while he faces the third woman. Now the first woman sets with and turns the second man and then the third man, while the first man sets with and turns the third woman and then the second woman; that is to say, the first couple dance diagonally. This movement is generally followed by the *reel of three* at the sides, *i.e.*, with the two people just danced with. Now the beginning of this *figure of eight* is rather confusing, and care should be taken to get it clear at once, or the crossing of the first couple to their own sides is badly done. As the first man is turning the second woman, instead of turning her right round he uses that turn as the beginning of the *figure of eight* and leaves her as he comes to face the third woman, with whom he then continues the figure, giving her his left shoulder. The first woman does the same with the second and third men, and this gives the first couple plenty of time to complete the figure, *i.e.*, to finish between the two

people with whom they have been dancing, and cross over to their own sides, one place further down the dance.

Rights and lefts is the name given to the movement by which the first and second couples cross over to change places and return again to their own sides. The name arises from the fact that the man gives the right hand to his *vis-à-vis* in passing and the left to his own partner, turning her round to her proper position on his right hand, thus completely changing places with their *vis-à-vis*. They then repeat the same back to their own places. The hand should always be given in this formation, as it makes the movement not only clearer, but much more elegant, and gives a real feeling of dancing together.

These are a few of the general formations used in the Scottish Folk Dance, but there are, of course, many more, used less frequently, and therefore carefully explained in the *Scottish Country Dance Books*.

Great care should be taken when teaching the giving of the hand, as this calls for grace and finish. How often we see it become a very stiff and grabbing movement. Arms are *never* linked in these dances, both hands being given generally in turning, except in such movements as *rights and lefts* and *ladies' chain*, where one partner has to be turned and then another, necessitating the giving of, first, the right and then the left hand, or where it is definitely stated that one hand only is given.

All the movements in the *Scottish Country Dance* are simple and unaffected, and no accessory movements should be introduced. Any embroidery of these dances is as

unpleasing and as foreign to them as are the variations which one hears with distress added to our simple Scottish airs.

2. THE SPIRIT OF THE DANCE.—As the Scottish Country Dance is primarily a ballroom dance, the spirit shown in it is, first of all, pleasant, friendly intercourse with a partner. There is no solo work in these dances; all the steps are done with and to a partner or *vis-à-vis*. Care should be taken to encourage this feeling of *shared* performance, and soon the dancers will find it natural to dance to each other, and thus gradually lose the feeling of self-consciousness which mars so many performances of these simple Country Dances. The carrying out of some of the figures requires much liveliness and a touch of the dramatic. Take, for example, the first figure of the “Triumph,” when the first woman goes down the middle and up with her own partner, then down again with the second man, followed by her own partner, and then up the middle under the arch made by the two men, verily *in triumph*. Naturally this figure must be done gaily and triumphantly, but without the least suggestion of exaggeration or overdone acting, or the charm is at once lost. The whole movement of the dance should seem to say, “Isn’t this fun!” and when the dancers have this feeling they are, indeed, in the spirit of the dance.

Another of the dances which requires the dramatic touch is the “Flowers of Edinburgh.” In this dance the partners chase each other; first the man follows the woman, who eludes him and comes up on the other side of the set,

and then the woman follows the man. Again, the fun of this chase must be realised to get the correct spirit. That there is a chase at all is often completely lost sight of, and the movement is done without the least attempt at showing this little piece of fun between the partners. As this chasing and escaping and chasing again is the "Flowers of Edinburgh," the whole character of the dance disappears if it is not distinctly shown. To get this spirit it is not necessary to hurry or rush the dance. It can be shown almost entirely by facial expression and the movement of the head. Make the performers love the dance and you will have no difficulty in getting the correct spirit. It is the same in all types of dancing. In teaching the first easy arm movements, the simplest way to get them soft and appealing is to say to the pupils "Look at your hands as if you loved them," and as the facial expression becomes soft and gentle, so do the movements of the hands and arms become soft and gentle. So in these Country Dances, if the pupils are told to look at their partners as if they liked them and loved to dance with them, the stiffness and self-consciousness disappears and the dance becomes spontaneous and self-expressive.

Point out in this same manner all the varieties of feeling required by the various formations, and the natural lovely and happy spirit of the Scottish Country Dance will soon be expressed unconsciously by all. Remember then, do not try to get spirit—

- (a) By mechanical means, *i.e.* by any movement of the head, hands, or body which would obtrude

itself on the spectator. By this I mean that if a nod of the head is absolutely in the spirit of the dance, you would not actually be aware that the dancers had nodded; for when a movement is made spontaneously at the unconscious command of the spirit, it merges into the action of the dance and becomes a part of the perfect whole. Watch them very carefully for accessory movements which stand out and catch the eye, as these are quite out of character.

- (b) By speed of movement. Speed only blurs the outline of the dance. Do not misunderstand. Speed and spirit can be found together, and, in fact, it is sometimes easier to get children, especially small children, to dance with greater gaiety when the time is fast; but the real essence of the spirit is lost when the time is hurried, while the technique is very much impaired.

3. TECHNIQUE.—Unlike the steps of most folk dancing, the steps of the Scottish Dances are not simple, free movements requiring little foot-training or correctness of execution. The Scottish steps are elaborate, and must be done with great neatness and precision. As in Highland step-dancing, the toe must be pointed with extreme care and the knees turned well out.

The chief steps used are the *pas de basque* and the *change of step and small hop*.

The *pas de basque* is done with a light springing step, but care should be taken to guard against an excessive movement in the knee joint which is quite foreign to this step, and would not occur if the knees were sufficiently turned out. The *jeté* is done from the hip joint, with straight knee, and is not a large movement. Correctly done, the *jeté* is also a guard against the exaggerated knee movement. This step, *i.e.*, the *pas de basque* and *jeté*, is used for all figures where there is no real progressive movement; *e.g.*, I do not consider that the first figure of "Petronella," in which the *pas de basque* step is used, is a real progression.

The *poussette* is also done with this step. The *poussette* is perhaps the most difficult step to teach. Correctly done, the couples should turn as in the waltz as they change places, and to do this with joined hands and this elaborate step is not easy. If the elbows are bent and a firm hold of hands taken it will be found much more simple. In *poussette* the man begins with his left and the woman with her right foot. An easy method of teaching *pas de basque* and *jeté* is to practise slowly as follows:—Step to the right with the right foot, put the left in front, stand on it, lifting the right foot behind, step back on to the right foot, and fling out the left foot with straight knee (this last is the *jeté*). Repeat to the left. Keep the knees well out all the time. When this is freely done, add the spring, and then the music.

The *change of step and hop*, or more correctly, *hop and change of step*, is done in all progressive movement: down the middle and up again, advance and retire, cast off

turning partner with one hand, &c. This step should be done on the tips of the toes. The right foot is brought forward with toe pointed and knee almost straight, while a little hop is made on the left foot, then step forward on to the right foot, bring the left close behind, step forward on the right and hop on it, bringing the left in front with a small knee bending, and so on. This knee bending is so small that the well-pointed toe is raised but a slight distance from the ground. In teaching this step count thus—"and step, step, step."

Running step is allowable in only one or two of the dances, e.g., in "Strip the Willow," where the time of the music does not allow of the *change of step and hop*.

Before teaching the dances, the steps should be carefully practised. They need so much patient practice that children especially, if allowed to combine this tedious practice with the actual performance of the dance, are apt to weary of the latter, blaming it rather than the steps for the work of which they have become tired.

A good test of the correctness of the technique is to take the general effect. If body and feet seem to be moving with ease and control and as a finished whole, no part being unduly obtrusive, then the step is well performed. Sound is a great help in teaching dancing steps. Turn your back and listen, and very soon your ear will be able to distinguish between the spirited and correct step, which is light and springing, and the exaggerated, machine-like step, which, without being noisy, has a noticeably hard beat.

Except when the hand is definitely given, there is no

arm movement in these dances. The man holds his arms loosely at his sides, while the woman holds her dress rather to the front between the thumb and first and second fingers, with the elbows straight.

As the original object of the holding of the skirt was to raise it from the feet, this gives an indication of the manner of doing it, that is to say, not too much to the front and not exaggerated in height.

4. MUSICAL STIMULUS.—Not until we see a company of dancers endeavouring to perform a spirited dance to poor and spiritless music do we realise the immense importance of the musical stimulus. Folk dancing has the tremendous advantage of having its own fine folk music—music which seems to play itself and to which it is impossible to keep one's feet still. But, unfortunately, even this seemingly unspoilable music can be spoiled. Those who cannot enter into the spirit of the dance and let that spirit flow through their fingers into the music which they are playing cannot really play for dancing. No folk tune is flat; it is full of risings and fallings, and as the dance varies its steps so should the music vary its lights and shades, finishing as the dance finishes in a final crescendo.

In playing from the Scottish Country Dance Books, careful attention should be paid to the marked metronome time, for that is the time which study has shown to be the most suitable for the spirit of the dance. Still, variations in time are quite allowable, and the pianist and teacher should try at various times until they find

that time which seems to suit best the spirit of the dancers. As in the case of the dancers, so in the case of the pianist. If the players do not feel the lilt and swing of the music, and do not appreciate the spirit of it, how can they play the melody so as to stimulate the dancers. It is, therefore, a matter of great importance to choose for an accompanist to the dancers not only one who is technically a good and correct musician and player, but one who can enter into the joy and spirit of both music and dance.

Before concluding, just one word about these dances at musical competition festivals. Make the children so love the dance that, while it is a beautiful and correct performance in every sense of the word, it is still, through the genuine pleasure they feel in it, a spontaneous and natural Folk Dance. Do not mar this effect of spontaneity by marching the performers on and off the platform. Let the entrance and exit be a part of the dance, which is, let it never be forgotten, a social or ballroom, not an exhibition, dance. It has been remarked, for example, that it is out of character for a set of Girl Guides to come on to the platform in any other way than by marching on two-and-two in military style. But how hopelessly out of keeping this is with a dance which we hope soon to see reinstated in all ballrooms. The Guides, after all, at such a moment are not so much Guides as children dancing a Folk Dance as we all desire a Folk Dance to be danced.

The dance should always begin and end with a bow and curtsy. Do not exaggerate either of these. The man's bow should consist of an inclination of the head and a slight movement of the shoulders, while the woman, placing

one foot behind, should smoothly bend, then stretch both knees, keeping the body erect.

In conclusion, let me lay stress once more on these few points.

1. Let happiness and pleasure, with the stimulus of gay and lively music, give the spirit of the dance.
2. Carry out with minute correctness the steps and formations of the dances, carefully avoiding any accessory movement.
3. Make the technique of the steps a constant practice *away from* the actual performance of the dance.

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